

Visitors make their way through a taro patch near Hana, Maui.

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Hana to host East Maui taro fest

Event will spotlight importance of crop to Hawaiians

By Edwin Tanji

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HANA, Maui — As with many other ancient cultures that felt a spiritual tie with a staple food crop, Hawaiians see taro as an important element in their spiritual as well as their physical well-being.

That's the basis for the East Maui Taro Festival, being held March 26 and 27 in Hana.

A festival based on taro "brings back the importance of taro in Hawaiian history," said Kalani English, a teacher of Hawaiian history and culture with the Hui No Ke Ola Pono Hawaiian health program.

The traditions of taro go back to the spiritual roots of Hawaiians, English said.

"For the Hawaiian, *Haloa* is the older brother of the Hawaiian people. When he died and was buried, what came forth from the ground was taro, to provide food for his younger brother," he said.

"Which is the reason for the great reverence for taro among Hawaiian people."

Water caught in the leaf sheaths of a taro plant also is considered sacred water, English said.

Given the religious significance as well as the physical importance of the plant as a primary food source for Hawaiians, it's natural that taro provides a focal point

The East Maui Taro Festival will held in Hana March 26 and 27. A symposium will be held 6-8 p.m. March 26 at Helene Hall. A festival of food, entertainment, demonstrations, produce and crafts sales and other events will begin 9 a.m. March 27 at the Hana Ballpark.

and a unifying force, he said.

That's the reason the taro plant is used in symbols important to Hawaiians from the logo of the Office of Hawaiian Affairs to emblems created by other Hawaiian groups.

English said the taro festival also will promote the nutritional value of the plant, which has been replaced as a staple even for Hawaiians by rice and bread.

Over the past 20 years, taro growing declined but has been making a slow comeback. In the early '70s, there were about 460 acres in taro cultivation, with commercial production of more than 9 million pounds.

By 1981, acreage dropped to 340 with barely 6 million pounds produced. As of 1991, the amount of land in taro was up to 600 acres, producing 7 million pounds.

Through Hui No Ke Ola Pono and programs such as the Waianae Hawaiian diet project, English said people should be-

come aware that taro "is a very healthy food for them."

Despite some people's distaste for commercially processed poi, taro provides an easily digested carbohydrate, lower in calories than rice and including calcium, iron, thiamine and riboflavin as part of the package.

All of the plant can be used for food, with the leaves and stems providing protein, vitamins A and C, and additional amounts of calcium, iron, thiamine and riboflavin.

The Hana festival was inspired by a taro festival held on Oahu last year. Hana festival coordinator Maria Orr said she was excited to learn about the cultural and nutritional significance of taro and recognizing the symbolism of taro.

It seemed natural that Hana, an area that still has an active taro culture, from backyard gardeners to commercial growers, should have a festival of its own, Orr said.

Increasing knowledge of the cultural roots will help Hawaiians develop cultural pride and awareness, English said.

Organizations sponsoring the festival include Alu Like-Hana, Friends of the Hana Coast, Hana Community Arts Council, Hana Cultural Center, Hana Community Association, Hotel Hana-Maui, Hui No Ke Ola Pono and the Wailua-Keanae Taro Association.